

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Re'eh
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Re'eh – The importance of Tzedakah

This week's Parasha of Re'eh contains 55 of the 613 mitzvot. It is the Parasha with the 3rd highest number of mitzvot as set out in the Torah. One of the mitzvot that we learn is the mitzvah of Tzedakah:

“If there will be amongst you a poor person, from one of your brothers, in one of your cities in the land that Hashem has given you, you shall not harden your heart, and you shall not close your hand from your needy brother. Rather you shall surely open your hand to him and you shall lend him enough for his needs, according to what he is lacking.” (Devarim 15:7-8)

The Torah tells us that we have to 'open our hand' to those in need. If we look at the palm of our hand as it opens and closes, we will notice something interesting¹. When our hand is closed, our fingers all look the same length. As we open our hand and stretch out our fingers, it becomes clear that the lengths of our fingers are different. Similarly, when we open our hand to the poor, we should realise that just as our fingers do not have the same length, so too, the poor people that we encounter also have different needs. Some need extra money. Some need more time. Some need a drink of water or a bite to eat. Some need a listening ear. Instead of just handing over a standard amount of charity, we should put in the effort and try to ascertain the individual needs of each person. Rav Yisrael Salanter defined chesed as “doing what the other person desires”. We should not underestimate the importance of spending time focusing on this subject. For example, Rabbi Avraham Grodzinski² spent two years just perfecting the art of greeting everyone with a smiling countenance!³

What is tzedakah? It is giving someone what they need. That is precisely what Hashem does. He gives us everything that we need. In fact, the act of giving tzedakah is hinted at in the four letters of the Tetragrammaton (Hashem's Divine name).⁴ The small letter 'Yud' (י) of Hashem's name represents a coin. The first letter 'Heh' (ה) represents the hand of the giver (the numerical value of 'Heh' is 5, representing the 5 fingers of the hand). The long letter 'Vav' (ו) represents the outstretched arm of the giver as they reach towards the recipient. And the final letter 'Heh' (ה) represents the hand of the recipient, opened up to receive the coin. When we give tzedakah to a poor person, we are emulating Hashem and literally acting out His name.

Th Rambam teaches that there are 8 levels of tzedakah, each one greater than the next.⁵

- 1 Giving tzedakah unwillingly
- 2 Giving an inadequate amount, but giving gladly and with a smile
- 3 Giving after being asked
- 4 Giving directly to the poor person but before being asked
- 5 Giving without knowing to whom one gives
- 6 Giving without the recipient knowing your identity
- 7 Giving totally anonymously (e.g. putting money into a tzedakah box)
- 8 The highest level of tzedakah is giving a **loan** to a poor person, or entering into a **partnership** with them, or finding them a **job**, until they no longer need to be dependent on others.⁶

¹ This idea was heard from Rabbi Yehuda Kohn, Melbourne Australia.

² 1883-1944, the primary disciple of Rabbi Nossan Tzvi Finkel (the "Alter of Slabodka"), the Mashgiach Ruchani of the Slabodka yeshiva, and the author of “Torat Avraham” a book of mussar lectures.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avraham_Grodzinski#cite_ref-Wein_3-1

⁴ This idea was heard from Rabbi Dovid Tsap, Melbourne Australia.

⁵ Rambam, Hilchot Matanot Aniyim (10:7-14).

⁶ Pay attention to the words that are in bold in the 8th level of tzedakah. They will be referred to again shortly.

Note that as we go higher up the list, there is a corresponding reduction in the likely level of the recipient's embarrassment. Giving tzedakah in a manner that causes the recipient to feel uncomfortable still satisfies the definition of giving tzedakah, but it is an inferior level. This is why the highest form of tzedakah is helping someone to help themselves. In such cases, the recipient becomes self-reliant and independent rather than just having to rely on others. This preserves their dignity and hopefully reduces or eliminates any feelings of shame.

We mentioned earlier that Hashem also gives tzedakah and when we give tzedakah we are emulating Hashem. But what level of tzedakah does Hashem give? Where is Hashem holding (so to speak) in the 8 levels of tzedakah? To answer this question, we need to understand why Hashem created the world.⁷

Hashem didn't create the world for His own benefit, because Hashem doesn't need anything. Hashem created the world for our benefit. Hashem wants to give us the greatest pleasure possible. Any pleasure that we enjoy in this physical, finite world is by definition limited. However, Hashem can offer us much greater pleasure than that. The greatest pleasure that we can attain is the pleasure of attaching ourselves to Hashem. That pleasure is limitless and eternal and is experienced forever in the World to Come. However, for such a pleasure to be as perfect as possible, we need to *earn* that pleasure ourselves. If we were to just receive that pleasure passively, we would feel an element of shame (like the recipients of the lower levels of tzedakah).

According to our above discussion of the levels of tzedakah, by receiving Hashem's goodness on any level except the highest possible level, we would experience a corresponding sense of shame. However, if we are to work for this level of pleasure and earn it ourselves, we would feel a sense of accomplishment and achievement. This provides us with an intrinsic feeling of pride and self-worth much more lasting than a superficial gift.

Therefore, in His wisdom, Hashem created a physical world and He sends our neshama (soul) down to this world. Hashem then:

- **lends** the neshama what it needs - i.e. a body (which needs to be returned after 120 years) plus everything that the body needs to function - food, clothes, oxygen, energy, etc. etc.
- gives the neshama a **job** with a detailed job description - i.e. to keep the mitzvot and to fulfil our own tafkaid (purpose) in the world
- makes each of us His **partner** - i.e. we 'help' Hashem to clothe the poor, care for the downtrodden, do acts of kindness for those that need it etc.

Ideally, after 120 years of struggle and hard work, we reach the World to Come having earned our reward. In this way, the pleasure that we will experience in the World to Come will not be reduced by a sense of shame from having received a 'freebie'.

Notice that bolded words above are all referred to in the 8th level of tzedakah discussed above. We see that Hashem's tzedakah is at the 8th and highest level. He **loans** us what we need, He gives us a **job** and He makes us His **partner** so that we can *earn* our reward and feel a sense of accomplishment rather than a sense of shame.

We can strive to remember that when we give tzedakah, we are emulating Hashem. And when we give tzedakah at the highest level, we are emulating Hashem even more closely because He gives tzedakah to us at the highest level.

Let's try something this week:

1. When a needy person asks us for money, make the effort to work out what else they need. Try to use your intuition to determine whether they need to get something off their chest. Do they need a few minutes to sit down and rest? Ask them if they need a bite to eat. Or perhaps they need to be driven somewhere.
2. Whenever someone asks you for help, try to help them to help themselves. In many cases it might just be easier to do the job yourself. Ideally, however, we should try to help the person to learn a new skill. In this way we will be emulating Hashem by giving at the highest level and helping to keep the recipient's self-esteem intact.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁷ This is obviously a very broad topic, and we will merely touch on it here. See the Ramchal's *Derech Hashem*, Chapter 2 for further discussion.